DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 321 054 CE 055 151

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TITLE Literacy in Latin America: Progress, Problems, and Perspectives. Literacy Lessons.
INSTITUTION International Bureau of Education, Geneva (Switzerland).
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 17p.; For other "Literacy Lessons" booklets, see CE 055 128-167. Also available in French.
AVAILABLE FROM International Bureau of Education, P.O. Box 199, 1211 Geneva 20, Switzerland.
PUB TYPE Reports - General (140)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; Adult Programs; Basic Skills; Developing Nations; *Education Work Relationship; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; *Government School Relationship; *Literacy Education; *Relevance (Education); *Socioeconomic Influences; Teacher Education
IDENTIFIERS International Literacy Year 1990; *Latin America

ABSTRACT

Latin America continues to have about 44 million illiterate people. Since the 1950s, education went from being a requisite of national identity to being recognized as an instrument of power, an important factor of development, the dispenser of human resources, and the guarantor of the continuity of the entire local scene. Important post-World War II education meetings have included the Regional Seminar on Adult Literacy and Education in Rio de Janeiro in 1949 and the Seminar in Primary Education in Montevideo in 1950. Other important meetings took place during the 1950s. In 1979, the Declaration of Mexico set the goals for the Major Project in Education in Latin America. Towns are no longer able to absorb part of the rural work force and most people who subsist on the peripheries of cities have nothing to do there. Among educational problems are teachers who do not have sufficient education, school programs that are not relevant to their students, and the large gap between community life and the scholastic milieu. Yet people are optimistic about changes. The conditions for success are of an ethical and political order. Only in a framework of greater equality will it be possible to make progress. International Literacy Year is a stimulating challenge and signifies the moment of truth for Latin America. (CML)

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LITERACY LESSONS

CE 055 151

INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR

Literacy in Latin America: progress, problems, and perspectives

by Miguel Soler Roca

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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INTERNATIONAL BUREAU OF EDUCATION

For this reason I wish to say to you today that as an educator I am indignant. Absolutely indignant.

Paulo Freire

Over the past several decades, Latin America has not succeeded in reducing the size of its illiterate population. The continent used to have, and still has, around 44 million illiterates. It is true that this figure includes a small number of illiterates from the non-Latin American countries in the Caribbean, with which this document will not deal, and that it represents barely 5% of the total number of illiterates in the world. Whereas one adult out of two in Africa is illiterate and one out of three in Asia, in Latin America, hardly one out every six persons aged 15 years and over is illiterate.

Yet, I see in these comparisons no reason for complacency, and, as a Latin American educator, I share the indignation of Paulo Freire. The right to education of the population of Latin America is still unjustifiably precarious. The goal appears still to be remote.

LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN:
REVEALING FIGURES

1984	Military spending	US$ 15,678,000,000
1981	Public expenditures for education	US$ 37,828,000,000
1981	Public expenditures for education per inhabitant	US$ 102
1986	Public expenditures for education	US$ 28,260,000,000
1986	Public expenditures for education per inhabitant	US$ 68
1986	Public expenditures for education as % of GNP	4.1%
1985	Literates aged 15 and over	209,000,000
1985	Illiterates aged 15 and over	44,000,000
1987	Children enrolled in primary schools	71,000,000
1987	School-age children not in school	8,500,000
1987	Percentage of school-age children not in school	13%

Already in the last century the constitutions of the Latin American countries called for mandatory, free primary education. At the end of the century, the countries in which education was considered a basic factor of national unity and the affirmation of the State constituted the majority. One could already speak of an educational project for the *people*, thanks to which universal, free primary education would lead to the consolidation of the fledgling nations.

The expansion of educational services progressed very slowly. Towards 1950, 40% of the population aged 15 or over were still illiterate, and the mean level of education attained by this age group was estimated at less than one complete year of school. It was from this time onwards, with the advent of great social and political changes, that a veritable educational explosion occurred.

The emergence of the middle class, economic currents in favour of industrialization, a progressive tendency to consider development as a 'plannable' global process, periodic outbreaks of radical processes of revolutionary change (most of which were aborted due more to external than internal factors), occasional resurgences of populist movements, and the development of communications were all contributing to the transformation of these different societies and their respective educational plans. In general, education went from being a requisite of national identity to being recognized as a instrument of power, as an important factor of development, as well as the dispenser of necessary human resources and the guarantor of the continuity of the entire social scheme. The people of common origin who were most motivated by the trend towards progressive urbanization, for their part began

to feel the need for their children to share in the benefits of education, so that this consideration became a goal in itself within each family wishing to be integrated into economic and political life, in an international economic situation which at that time was favourable. This being said without forgetting the extraordinary heterogeneity of the natural and human context of the region.

The movement of international co-operation which followed the Second World War had a considerable impact on educational development in Latin American. In the early years of its existence, Unesco co-operated with governments in the training of teachers, in the re-orientation of normal schools, in improving educational supervision and administration, with particular attention to rural areas. UNICEF (the United Nations Children's Fund) financed projects for the training of teachers and the improvement of the living and study conditions of school and preschool children. The United Nations provided support for educational reform programmes. The Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA), in collaboration with Unesco, disseminated the bases and techniques of educational planning throughout the continent.

At that time three important gatherings took place: in 1948, the Regional Seminar on Education in Caracas; in 1949, the Seminar on Adult Literacy and Education in Rio de Janeiro; in 1950, the Seminar on Primary Education in Montevideo. Forty years later, the reports resulting from these seminars still startle with their currentness, the force of their contents, and the sensitivity and apparent applicability of their recommendations.

In 1951 Unesco and the Government of Mexico created the Regional Basic Education Center for Latin America (CREFAL), in Patzcuaro. Shortly thereafter, the Organization of American States (OAS) and the government of Venezuela established in Rubio the

Interamerican Rural Normal School, which, beginning in 1958, served as an interamerican rural education centre, with the co-operation of Unesco. The graduates of both institutions numbered in the thousands.

In 1956 other meetings were held in Lima, Peru, as a result of which Unesco's Major Project for the expansion of primary education in Latin America was launched, with the approval that same year of the General Conference of the organization. The relevant resolution limited the duration of the Plan to a period of ten years, 'after which' – it was said – 'the co-operating States will have been able to provide primary education to nearly all children of primary school age'. Spurred on by this objective, the enrolment in primary schools in the region was increased from over 21 million pupils in 1957 to nearly 33 million in 1965.

The regional conferences of Ministers of Education followed. Seminars, meetings and workshops multiplied. But the broad activities for which the continent seemed well prepared were not forthcoming. In contrast, plans and expressions emerged, held sway, and fell into oblivion, emanating from those who hoped to re-orient educational theory and practice, offering the initiated *the* infallible, modern solution: basic education, continuing education, education for community development, functional literacy, education on the basic needs, participatory investigation, microplanning, and formal, non-formal, informal, liberation, people's etc. education.

Each of these expressions, as well as the corresponding attempts to put them into practice, has its place in the history of concerns and good intentions. The majority of them also, unfortunately, are recorded in the chronicles of Latin American disillusionment. It seemed as if, periodically, because the work undertaken remained unfinished, we would have to begin all over again, on new foundations. And, therefore, between the quarrels of educators and the indifference of

the satisfied segment of society, the number of illiterates was not decreasing.

With exceptions, for I cannot help but remember that, while we were quibbling over semantics, in Cuba illiterates became an extinct species – in one year! – and there was room for every child in public schools.

1979: A NEW PHASE BEGINS

At the end of 1979 a new Regional Conference of Ministers of Eucation met in Mexico. After making a grim assessment of the educational situation, the Conference adopted the Declaration of Mexico, which contained progressive quantitative and qualitative goals, and called upon the determined support of the ministers in charge of economic planning, who were also present at the Conference. 'It is what one *is* and not what one *has*', the Declaration stated, 'which should

The Conference was the first of a series of subsequent efforts and meetings, which led to approval of the Major Project of Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (which it will be noted is the second *main project in the region on themes related to those of the* first, *the objectives of which were the following:*

- *to ensure, before 1999, the enrolment in school of all children of school age and offer them a minimum general education lasting between 8 and 10 years.*
- *to eliminate illiteracy before the end of the century, and to develop and expand educational services for adults.*
- *to improve the quality and efficiency of education systems by introducing the necessary reforms.*

have priority in the design and orientation of the global development policies of countries'.

The Major Project is currently in the implementation phase. It relies on Unesco's Regional Office for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (OREALC) as a source of stimulus and technical support; its Intergovernmental Regional Committee has already held three meetings and, in order to exchange experiences and investigations and to train management personnel, three co-operation networks have been set up, as well as a regional information system.

African, Asian and Arab countries subsequently went on to propose similar regional projects to overcome illiteracy and low enrolment rates. These steps contribute to the advancement towards the goal collectively accepted by the international community – including the United Nations General Assembly – of enabling mankind to embark upon the twenty-first century with a considerably lower number of illiterates.

SIZE OF THE TASK

Let us summarize the current educational situation, with particular attention to basic indicators such as those presented in Unesco documents.

Children currently enrolled in primary school number 71 million. But 13% of primary school age children, that is 8.5 million, are not in school. Of the twenty Latin American countries, in at least seven the net primary school enrolment rate is less than 85%.

High rates of grade repetition continue to hamper the effectiveness of primary instruction: approximately 15% of pupils in 1980, compared to the worldwide average of 10%. With regard to drop-outs, of the pupils enrolled in the first grade in 1980, 27% abandoned their studies before the fourth grade, and this region of the world is that with the highest drop-out rate. Between the first and second years of study, 15% of children quit school. Grade repetition and dropping out together mean that for every 100 pupils enrolled in

With regard to illiteracy, it is not easy to indicate quantitative progress, at least for the region as a whole.

For Latin America and the Caribbean, the total number of illiterates 15 years old or more was estimated at 44,400,000 in 1970, 44,300,000 in 1980, and 44,000,000 in 1985. It is true that the illiteracy rate went from 27.3% in 1970 to 17.3% in 1985. The persistence of the absolute figures indicates that illiterates who die are replaced in the statistics by equally illiterate adolescents who have not been in school or have studied for an insufficient length of time. According to the most recent data available, the illiteracy rates in four countries exceed 40%. In three of them, the rates fall between 20 and 39%. In eight, between 10 and 19%, and in only five countries are the rates below 10%. With the exception of Uruguay, illiteracy in all countries is higher among women than among men. In seven countries, the number of illiterates in 1985 was higher than in 1970.

1985/1986 in the first year, only sixty can hope to attain the fourth year. This scholastic survival rate is the lowest among various regions of the world.

In a few countries illiteracy may be considered to be a residual problem, affecting the oldest age groups. But in the majority of cases, it plagues all age groups, and, as is well known, rural and indigenous populations are especially affected. In twelve countries rural illiteracy exceeds urban illiteracy by more than 20%. I repeat that the region is characterized by its heterogeneous nature, a factor which is also evident within each of these countries.

THE IMPACT OF THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT

Exceptions notwithstanding, the great increase in primary school enrolment was more the result of increased social demand than deliberate policies to capture the total school-age population. As long as towns were able to absorb part of the rural work force, incorporating it into industry and the expanding service sector, families made sacrifices to offer the new generation the greatest number of years education possible. The situation has changed: the majority of persons who subsist on the peripheries of cities have nothing to do there. Simply, they have been expelled from

the countryside by a land tenancy and production system which requires less and less manpower. It increases the surface area cultivated, but reduces the number of family-type exploitations, which are absorbed into agricultural and agro-industrial complexes, converting the formerly independent producers into wage earners and expelling the remainder towards the suburbs of cities, women and children especially. The former feudal landed estate is being replaced by a modern corporate estate.

The rural school suffers from the effects of these important changes. Country schools are shut down, without solutions being proposed for guaranteeing instruction for the remaining children. Meanwhile, urban educational services are ill prepared, both quantitatively and qualitatively, to absorb the tide of migrants, the bearers of new poverty, which is reaching massive proportions.

To deal with these problems, funds are obviously necessary. The Declaration of Mexico recommended that Member States increase educational funding to at least 7% of their gross national product. That was in 1979. In 1980, such funding had risen to 4.6%, to drop to 4.1% by 1986. Per capita public spending on education, which in 1981 was equivalent to US $102 per annum, slipped to $68 in 1986. In addition, the extraordinary expansion which occurred in instruction at the secondary and university levels presupposes, in a situation of scarce resources, additional pressure to reduce the amount of funds earmarked for the basic education of children and adults.

In summary, if we confine ourselves to the figures for 1986, the goal of 7% has still not been attained in any country in Latin America. How can we explain this?

The region has a foreign debt of more than US $400,000 million. Debt servicing in 1988 cost 28% of the value of exports. Between 1982 and 1988 the sums transferred by Latin America to other regions ex-

ceeded by US $187,700 million the capital income from outside the region. The South is subsidizing the North, or to put it more clearly, because high-income groups in the South cultivate sumptuous lifestyles and contribute to the deterioration of the overall financial situation by exporting capital, because in half the countries of Latin America public military spending exceeds spending on education, because of restrictions on spending for social services (estimated by CEPAL [Comisión Económica de las Naciones Unidas para América Latina] at 25%), the quality of life of the rank and file of society and the ability to meet the educational requirements of children, adolescents and adults are reduced. It is with the sacrifices of those who are impoverished and poorly prepared to defend themselves that resources are gleaned for financing the foreign debt and various forms of internal waste.

Thus, in this region, which is extraordinarily rich in natural resources and even in skills, the poverty of the people is increasing. Studies carried out by CEPAL long before the recent crisis estimate that 40% of the population is poor and 20% indigent, and that the incomes of the latter are not even sufficient to cover their food needs. The situation today must be far worse. In several countries the masses have taken to the streets in protest. In such conditions, with the right to life being questioned, can the universal enjoyment of the right to education be hoped for in the not-too-distant future?

AN EDUCATION DIVORCED FROM REALITY

To these serious obstacles of a contextual nature are added problems requiring solutions and which are peculiar to the education systems themselves. They relate to the low levels of instruction of teachers, the lack of relevance or interest of school programmes, the gap between community life and the scholastic milieu, the scant attention education systems pay to environmental characteristics (especially in suburban areas) and to the indigenous culture, traditional methodologies which devitalize teaching—learning processes, the rudimentary character of the equipment of learning centres, the unresolved divorce between education in school and out of school, the precariousness of social services catering to small children. Exceptions to these general patterns exist, but are few and sometimes short-lived.

THE MOST BASIC RESPONSES

Yet, nonetheless, what optimism is invested in the search for change!

For, just as we must pay homage to the pioneers who invented the first, original forms of popular, rural education, just as we owe a debt of gratitude to those who were able to take advantage of the great liberating, political changes in order to broaden and reform education systems (I have in mind Mexico, Guatemala, Bolivia, Cuba, Peru, among others), just as, more recently, we can admire the young people of Nicaragua for having succeeded in reducing illiteracy considerably and having laid the conceptual and methodological foundations of a vast innovative educational operation

for the people, we must also, now and in the time to come, follow attentively and protect the many courageous undertakings, the majority of which are experimental, modest and even anonymous, which at present are being launched in nearly every country in the region in the quest for a response to the unjustifiable problem of century-old educational discrimination.

In some cases there are no barriers between these efforts and the official supply of education, or at least there is a certain mutual permeability or positive dialogue between them. In other countries the languages being used remain different. The general overture towards a kind of education which takes the needs of the people to heart is not on the horizon. Because of this, it remains a matter of urgency that the Major Project retain all its vitality, and pursue and amplify its contacts simultaneously with the social base, with specialists and with national leaders.

Thanks to the Major Project and the technical encounters and publications it produced, these artisans of education now have a forum. In such a way that two parallel, in certain cases somewhat divergent, movements are taking place in Latin America. The first is the programme of governmental services which, with varying success, have the task of conducting their educational programmes until the three objectives of the Major Project, which they themselves have set, are achieved. The second is taking place at the grass-roots level, among institutional militants, in universities, in parishes and labour unions. It relies on innovative methods and resources, and maintains that real life is the inspirational basis of any curriculum. Frequently it calls itself popular. *It believes in the force of the participation of everyone and, above all, of the beneficiaries of educative processes, called upon to assume with full awareness their culture and to make of their formal or non-formal education an individual response to their problems. This movement is gaining momentum each day, the guardian of a vast body of theoretical knowledge and of a long period of practical experience. Although it is foreseeable that it will not succeed in radically transforming the high figures which continue to be of concern to us, it constitutes a set of laboratories for the renovation of basic education, literacy and, by an inevitable process of osmosis, of wearisome formal education services.*

IN PREPARATION FOR INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR

The march of Latin American countries towards a goal as modest, as indisputable, as the elimination of ignorance of basic knowledge is proving to be long, arduous, rugged and at times marked by the loss of lives. The delay in achieving it has the makings of a major moral scandal.

We are not confronted with a technical problem, since, technically speaking, it has been resolved in diverse ways. Nor are we dealing with an essentially financial problem, at least to the extent to which it is proclaimed; the countries that have put an end to illiteracy or reduced it appreciably, in Latin America as well as in other regions of the world, were also poor; they did not mobilize great sums of money, but other forces which are always latent in the midst of peoples. The conditions for success are of another nature, they are of an ethical and political order. The key, to my view, is in the persistent and more dedicated march towards justice between men and between nations. Only in a framework of greater equality will it be possible to make progress in satisfying fundamental rights, among which education is surely one. In the absence of systems which are just, sober and disposed to accept the consequences of the universalization of knowledge, there will never be sufficient resources for improving the education of the people. Without a new international order, without a proposal for solidarity which makes the planet habitable for all men equally, underdevelopment, which is totally unjustifiable in a region such as Latin America, will never be overcome.

The work ahead is, therefore, considerable. Unless a significant reversal in trends occurs, the objectives set by the Major Project will still be very remote in the year

2000. It is a task, moreover, with broader developments in perspective: universalizing basic education and reducing illiteracy are immediate requirements, needing simultaneous action on a two-fold path which is properly concerted; but dealing with *functional* illiterates – who are more numerous than are *total* illiterates – and expanding and diversifying regular and adult education, are inevitable tasks, full of demands and promises on the eve of the twenty-first century.

If the ILY is a stimulating challenge for everyone, for Latin America it signifies the moment of truth, the year of clear speech, a time for action. For the majority of Latin American countries, 1990 will be a year of some discomfort. As illiteracy and literacy depend so greatly on contextual conditions, the message of the ILY cannot be limited to merely educational aims. It is necessary to adopt more far-reaching measures, which correct the trajectory of poverty, weariness and disillusionment.

* * *

By recognizing things in this way, I do not mean to dishearten or demobilize those at work in education and literacy. Quite the contrary: 1990 must be for them a year of ratifications, for beyond any other consideration, education is an inalienable right, an essential dimension of human development, a fundamental sector of public responsibility. Today, the majority of those involved in educating have abandoned all naïve belief in the autonomy and omnipotence of the educative act. The reports and self-analyses arising from the planetary exercise of reflection which will be embarked upon in 1990 can give new impetus to their efforts.

Unesco has disseminated the objectives of the ILY and its proposals for action in connection with it. As far as Latin America is concerned, I would be satisfied if

the following results were achieved: that those responsible nationally be convinced that peace depends on equality; that the faith of educators in education be increased, and that they integrate their specialized work, ever exciting and perfectible, in the global struggle for a world based on justice.

This publication has been produced by the International Bureau of Education within the context of International Literacy Year, 1990.

The International Bureau of Education acknowledges with grateful thanks this contribution by Miguel Soler Roca to the cause of Literacy. Born in Barcelona, Spain, in 1922, Mr Soler Roca began his career as a teacher in rural areas of Uruguay. After working for Unesco in various Latin American countries, he became director of its Division of Literacy, Adult Education and Rural Development in 1974. He is the author of numerous publications on education in Uruguay and Latin America, and now works as a consultant for Unesco.

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Published in 1990 by Unesco: International Bureau of Education,
P.O. Box 199, 1211 Geneva 20, Switzerland.